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BIBLE ADVENTURES SCRIPT:

A2259 ~ Jephthah's Daughter.

Welcome to Bible Adventures. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow. Jesus is Lord of all.

Once the Israelites had settled in Canaan and Joshua their leader had died, the tribes of Israel had a number of judges rule over them during the following 300 years. Soon after Joshua's death, the next generation of Israelites neglected worshipping and respecting their God in favour of Canaanite pagan gods. God punished the people for turning away from their covenant promise of serving Him and Him only. Over time, God allowed a number of enemy nations round Israel to come and plunder the Israelites until they came to their senses and cried out to God for help.

During those difficult times, a man named Gilead was living in the region of Gilead and he had a number of sons by his wife and one son by another woman. He named that son Jephthah. When all the sons grew up, they chased Jephthah away from receiving any part of the family inheritance. Jephthah moved well away and gathered some fighting men around him to raid travelling merchants as they moved their goods from one town to another.

In Judges, Chapter 10, it's recorded that God had a conversation with the sinning Israelites. He told them that He'd helped them in the past when they'd been attacked by enemies. Yet, after receiving His help, they still left Him to serve other pagan gods. So God told the people that He wasn't going to deliver them any more from their enemies. He said that instead, they should cry out to those manmade gods that they had continually chosen for their worship. The Israelites decided to admit their sins against God and they asked for victory over their enemies that very day. They destroyed all the foreign gods they'd been worshipping and turned back to serve the Lord.

In today's *Bible Adventure*, the people of Ammon, just east of Gilead on the eastern side of the Jordan River, were harassing the Israelites. When the men of Gilead tried to draw up an army to fight the Ammonites, they didn't have an experienced soldier to lead them. So they decided to visit Jephthah and ask him to be their commander.

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This sad story started with the Ammonites demanding some land that the Israelites had owned for nearly 300 years. On God's behalf, Moses had given this land to two Israelite tribes. Originally, the Amorites had captured the land from Moab. In Jephthah's time, the Ammonites had taken control of Moab and were demanding that Israel give the land back. If this sounds complicated, it just means that the cycle of war and winning territory depended on who controlled the strongest army at that time.

Jephthah first tried to use diplomacy with the king of the Ammonites. He sent a letter stating that Israel hadn't taken the disputed land from either Moab or Ammon, because the Children of Israel had travelled outside that land on their way from Egypt. They had asked to permission to travel through Amorite territory but at the time, they were refused and in fact, the king of the Amorites had even come out to attack them as they travelled past. Jephthah finished his letter by saying that God was the one who had given the Amorite land to Israel.

In Old Testament times, wars between nations were viewed as wars between the gods of those nations. Israel's God had given the land that was under dispute to Israel, that the Ammonites had no right to it. But the king of Ammon took no notice of Jephthah's words. The Spirit of the Lord then came upon Jephthah and so he gathered his troops and advanced against the king of Ammon. At the time, Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and from the outcome, we can be sure that it wasn't the Holy Spirit of God who led him to make it!

There's nothing wrong with making certain kinds of vows or solemn promises to express to God our devotion, gratitude and commitment. However, the Bible warns us not to make vows hastily, as breaking a promise to God is a very serious matter. Jephthah made a vow to God to sacrifice the first thing that came out of his house to greet him on returning victorious from war. But there were two things wrong with Jephthah's vow. Firstly, this vow was made to manipulate God into giving Jephthah the victory by trying to bargain with Him. It's like: 'If you do this for me, God, I'll do that for you.' Evidently, Jephthah thought that God needed to be 'bribed' (as if this could be possible) into giving the victory to Israel.

Secondly, Jephthah's vow was very foolish and irresponsible. He should have realised that what would come out of his house first may very well be a human being. To sacrifice a human being as a burnt offering was forbidden by God. It was the same as offering one's children to an idol.

God did give victory to Israel and when Jephthah returned home, what a shock he got when his only daughter came running out to meet him, so happy that he'd won the war! Jephthah was beside himself with grief, but as Moses had commanded that a vow must not be broken, Jephthah felt obliged to offer his daughter as a burnt offering as he had vowed.

Jephthah's daughter responded in an amazing way: she accepted her fate. Her greatest sorrow was that she wouldn't be able to produce any children to carry on her father's line.

Should Jephthah have broken his vow? Yes, of course he should have done so. The Lord had already made provision for releasing certain people from vows that had been rashly made. In this particular case, the Lord wouldn't have wanted Jephthah to break a major law of murdering someone in order to keep a lesser one of fulfilling a rash vow. Jephthah needed to confess his sin for why he made such a vow in the first place and ask God for forgiveness. Then the Lord would have released him from his vow.

We feel empathy for Jephthah's daughter too, as well as all young people whose lives are cut short before they make a contribution to society. Of course, we would never have heard of Jephthah's daughter if her father hadn't made such a thoughtless vow. Did he expect an animal to be the first thing to come out of his house and greet him? Yet in spite of our faith or calling in life, we humans can make dreadful mistakes and commit horrible sins. Yet God is there always ready to forgive us when we confess to Him our sins and turn away from them.

Another aspect of the character of Jephthah's daughter was her instant forgiveness of the foolish thing her father had done. She never reproached him or rebelled at the impending death sentence that he'd brought upon her. Jephthah himself must have had a hard time forgiving himself. Parents who accidentally harm a child of theirs suffer greatly for it. It's easy to fall into the 'What if ...?' complex of self-blame and consider all the ways things could have been done so that an accident wouldn't have happened.

There is comfort for us in God's Word, as stated in Romans, Chapter 8: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Accidents and mistakes happen to us all. If God no longer condemns us when we or others turn to Him, then we shouldn't condemn ourselves or others either. Our minds can handle only one thought at a time, so focusing on Jesus, God's Son, and His trustworthy ability to erase all sin, pushes away the 'What ifs ...?' that easily come to our minds. It takes practice to fix our eyes on Jesus in the pain and grief of life, but as we give our problems to Jesus, He helps us to overcome the pain, shame and self-rejection that we feel. Certainly God doesn't want us crippled by oppression from our past deeds.

In the light of eternity, it's clear that both Jephthah and his daughter had a real faith in God. And today, 3,000 years later after this incident, both of them are in heaven with God because of their faith. The deep message of this story is that Jephthah and his daughter submitted themselves to God, regardless of the cost, and God abundantly rewarded them for doing so.

What can we learn from all this? Jephthah's early life of suffering hardship and rejection trained him to be Israel's leader. It isn't who our parents are that qualifies or disqualifies us for God's service. The only qualification is our faith and trust in God. However, faith isn't inherited; it's something we receive as a gift from God and under the guidance of God's Spirit, we ourselves must exercise. Jephthah's story illustrates again how God often chooses unlikely people to carry out His work.

Following Jephthah's victory over the Ammonites, the Israelite soldiers from Ephraim, living on the western side of the Jordan River, crossed the river and came to Gilead to speak to Jephthah. Jephthah again first tried diplomacy but the soldiers from Ephraim refused to return home. With no other choice before him, Jephthah gathered his troops and he fought against them. How sad it was that the Israelites had by then degenerated into tribal fighting amongst themselves!

The power of Ephraim was broken in that battle and Jephthah became the ruler of all Israel. He lived for only another six years, which wasn't long enough to unite all the Israelite tribes again. The underlying cause of their disunity was that they had stopped worshipping the Lord as their Ruler and King. Without the Lord, no unity was possible in Israel.

Have you ever made a promise to someone and then later you wished that you hadn't done so? In Deuteronomy, Chapter 23, it says: "If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin." And in Ecclesiastes, Chapter 5, it says: "It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Do not let your speech cause you to sin ..."

For believers in the Lord Jesus, don't put off bringing closure for something that is troubling your conscience. If you need to give a long-overdue apology or fulfil a promise to God or another person years before, pray to the Lord for forgiveness and the strength to set things right! This may mean sorting out some unfinished things with God Himself. Closure is usually difficult and creates within us a deep sense of weakness, but to be right with ourselves and with our Lord God, it needs to be done. Ask God's help to do this and leave the outcome of the response in His hands.

Always remember Jeremiah, Chapter 17, Verse 7: "Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in Him."

The drama is from The Bible In Living Sound.

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